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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA ELECTION: SAM RAINSY PARTY STANDS TO GAIN
BUT BY HOW MUCH?

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED. HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: One day before the official cooling-off period ahead of the July 27 election, the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) is assessing its chances as good in many of Cambodia's 24 provinces. In more sober moments - when not rhetorically claiming imminent victory - party regulars will say they can obtain anywhere between 27 to 35 seats in the 123-seat National Assembly, a gain over the 24 seats they won in 2003. Based solely on Commune Council elections results in 2007, Sam Rainsy could net a gain of seven seats. But there was less on the line in those 1621 local Commune Council elections. The Sam Rainsy party has a new grass-roots orientation and a "softly, softly, quietly, quietly" strategy designed not to draw attention to its gains. At the same time that SRP covets many of the 20 or so seats FUNCINPEC (FCP) stands to lose, the ruling Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP) has been working overtime to win over FCP supporters. CPP Senior Minister Mem Sam An has been aggressive in trying for a full sweep of Svay Rieng's five seats, for example, and is likely to snatch away a FCP seat that was within SRP's grasp just six months ago. The Human Rights Party often positions itself as an alternative to SRP and may drain past supporters. SRP strong-suit policies on issues that might have swayed voters just a week ago -- economic uncertainty, joblessness, high inflation -- are perceived as less important, as the election takes place in the shadow of the Preah Vihear border dispute and the electorate focuses on national security. Post offers a snapshot analysis of SRP's position and chances in the election, province by province. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Sam Rainsy Party perceptions and strategies going into Sunday's National Election constitute one indicator of the party's political acumen and represent a measure of its credibility as the main opposition party. With seats being contested province by province under a party's name, the National Assembly election is also a test of the party democratization efforts begun by the SRP in 2006 with support from the International Republican Institute (IRI). If SRP has indeed secured loyal support for provincial leadership from members at the local level, then this new effort should translate into more votes for the party. Some of the more realistic SRP candidates know their position is weak in a number of provinces where CPP has been and remains strong - Sihanoukville, Kep, and Ratanakiri to name three. They are out on the hustings holding high the SRP party banner nonetheless, hopeful to score gains in long-term supporters for future elections. Others are in the thick of a battle for the hundreds of thousands of voters who once supported the Royalists. Prey Veng and Kandal may offer up at least two former FCP seats and Battambang and Kampong Speu are two more battleground provinces where an FCP seat is almost sure to fall.

No-Contest, One-Seat Provinces; and Then There's Pailin

¶3. (SBU) Among one-seat provinces, Sihanoukville, Kep and Ratanakiri have voted for CPP over SRP by a margin of at least five to one in past elections. Other sure-fire CPP seats are Odar Meanchey, Stung Treng, Preah Vihear, Koh Kong, and Mondolkiri. A unique case is exotic Pailin Municipality, the former Khmer Rouge stronghold that went to Sam Rainsy Party in the second mandate in 1998, but was won by CPP in 2002 Commune Council elections and has eluded re-capture ever since. In the 2007 Commune Council elections, SRP won half as many votes as CPP in Pailin and appears to be gaining strength. Given that SRP candidate Long Bunny has not previously served in parliament, it appears the SRP is not willing to put itself on the line with a high-profile candidate for the seat. While SRP is more visible in Pailin (which is prosperous through small-hold farming in corn sold to Thailand), isolated allegations persist of undue influence by village chiefs in Pailin. One village chief was reported to warn a family earlier this year that if they didn't join CPP, they would be "banned" from the village, an idle threat that many local officials found laughable, but a needless strong-arm tactic against poor and uneducated farmers that the CPP center does not favor.

More Depth Among SRP Candidates in Kampong Cham, Phnom Penh

¶4. (SBU) By the looks of its candidate lists for Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh, SRP is hoping to gain at least one more seat among these traditional strongholds for a net gain from 11 to 12 seats. (COMMENT: It is notable that SRP has placed well-connected Cambodian-Americans who bring in substantial

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financial support just below the traditional threshold of winning seats. END COMMENT.) Phnom Penh's workers and educated middle class are two of SRP's strongest voter bases.

With the CPP taking credit for a recent \$6 monthly bonus among all garment workers, and with the rise of a new generation of uneducated but wealthy businesspersons in Cambodia's recent economic boom, CPP may be increasing its base and holding back any further SRP gains.

¶5. (SBU) The youth vote is a major uncertainty in the two seat-rich provinces of Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh. Nationwide, 260,000 new young voters have joined the rolls for the first time, and more than half of all of Cambodia's voters are aged 18-30. On the one hand, many youth are better educated and more attuned to concepts of personal freedom and democratic values (SRP strong points). On the other hand, CPP has produced an unprecedented number of youth events this past year. One defection may be the key to understanding the youth vote split between CPP and SRP. The CPP wooed away SRP's National Youth Movement leader (reportedly with cash, a big car and a bevy of motorbikes among other inducements), who is active and vocal, skills he has been deploying with some effect against SRP over the months since he defected. In radio talk shows, he emphasizes the nepotism and cronyism among the inner circles at the SRP. True or not, his stories resonate and he appears to attract many more callers than the typical call-in show.

The Middle Provinces: Prey Veng and Kandal

¶6. (SBU) Though they each have 11 seats in the National Assembly, these two eastern neighbors to Phnom Penh have never been strong suits for SRP, which won three seats in Kandal and two seats in Prey Veng in 2003. FUNCINPEC carried three seats in each province in 2003 -- the Royalist base had been strong. However, with Ranariddh's departure from FCP and the creation of his own party, the Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) did surprisingly well in these provinces in the CC elections. Given that CPP is fielding a lesser minister in the sixth position on its candidate list for Kandal (which includes Hun Sen at the top), it would appear that CPP

expects to easily gain one seat. SRP strength in the Commune Council elections, taken at face value, would indicate that SRP could pick up two more seats here, one in each province, but SRP can take nothing for granted. Nonetheless, Tioulong Saumura told Pol/Ec Chief July 20 that people will be surprised by Sam Rainsy's showing in Prey Veng.

Battambang: Premier Battleground Province

¶17. (SBU) If the large number of SRP campaign complaints to the Provincial Election Committee says nothing else, it indicates how seriously SRP takes Battambang province with one FCP seat up for grabs. Battambang is SRP Secretary General Eng Chhay Eang's home province, and the base from which he mounted a successful grass-roots campaign to secure supporters to back his run for the top internal SRP position.

Knowing that CPP did not do well enough in the CC elections to be assured of adding to its current five seats in Battambang, Eng Chhay Eang is using every means at his disposal to increase SRP's voice in parliament and gain the one FCP seat at stake. SRP boycotted a youth debate held in the only local hall large enough to accommodate the audience because it was government controlled. SRP held campaign parades a full week before the official campaign period. Local CPP officials acknowledge SRP's aggressive campaign tactics but state they have chosen not to confront SRP. Judging by the massive rallies and parades held in Battambang, CPP is devoting vast resources to increase its parliamentary standing.

New and Difficult Frontiers: Svay Rieng and Pursat

¶18. (SBU) With no seat in either province previously, but having won about one fifth of the vote in each of these provinces in the 2007 CC elections, SRP earlier was feeling confident about picking up a seat in each during this year's election. On the opening day of the election campaign season, the 10,000-person party parade that CPP Senior Minister Mem Sam An orchestrated with hundreds of vehicles going down route 1 to the Vietnamese border (including helicopter eye-in-the-sky television coverage) was just one more indication that CPP is committed to its Svay Rieng strategy motto: "five-out-of-five." SRP MP Ngor Sovann, who had previously served in Kandal but was assigned to lead the SRP campaign in Svay Rieng, defected to CPP earlier in the

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year. It might have been possible for SRP to pick up an FCP seat in Pursat, since FUNCINPEC is not putting up one of its leading lights on that province's candidate list. However, the number one CPP candidate is Minister of Industry, Mines and Energy Suy Sem and an incumbent MP and a Pursat native is CPP's fourth-listed candidate in an unspoken four-out-of-four strategy.

SRP's One-Seater Wonders

¶19. (SBU) In six provinces where SRP won a single seat in 2003, three showed real growth in voter support during the 2007 CC elections, indicating that SRP might be able to take a second seat in each: Takeo, Siem Reap, and Kampong Speu. Both Takeo (Sok An's home province) and Siem Reap (Tea Banh's base) have received massive infusions of CPP support. SRP has not put up strong candidates beyond incumbents in the number one slots. SRP looks to maintain its current six seats in these areas.

Kampot and Kampong Thom: Complicated

¶10. (SBU) In Kampot, Mu Sochua early on engineered the removal of Kampot native Kieng Vang from the provincial candidate list -- his consolation was that he could have a

safe SRP seat in Phnom Penh -- but he was so furious that he quit the party, returned to FUNCINPEC, and is their number one candidate in Kampot. Were it not for these internal party maneuverings and other headline-grabbing stunts, Mu Sochua might have helped secure for SRP two of Kampot's six seats. As it stands, SRP may be facing an uphill battle to hold on to one seat. In Kampong Thom, where SRP has a number of Commune Council Chief positions, SRP has put up only one strong MP incumbent. The number two candidate is a grandson of an historic figure from the early anti-Sihanouk days who was an ally of Sam Rainsy's anti-Sihanouk father, Sam Sary.

¶11. (SBU) Banteay Meanchey is the source of another SRP safe seat based largely on the thousands of casino workers who also reside there. FUNCINPEC and NRP have effectively split the Royalist vote, but it appears that SRP support is not strong enough to win more than one of the province's six seats.

"Softly, Softly, Quietly, Quietly" a Success...

¶12. (SBU) The long-term strategy SRP instituted last year is to work at the grass-roots on constituent issues but without fanfare or calling attention to themselves. In this work -- which should be considered separate from the high-visibility national campaign run by Rainsy and his inner circle -- SRP has no interest in confronting CPP, or using aggressive tactics, or even initiating a competition, according to a senior SRP cabinet member, who labeled it the "softly, softly, quietly, quietly" strategy that has already won over many supporters. SRP will work on one problem at a time to help people improve their lives and remember that SRP was the source of assistance, he noted. In Kampong Speu, EU Long Term Election Observer Ruth Meyer noted to Pol/Ec chief on July 17 how effective Sam Rainsy had been in coming to different rural villages and attracting substantial crowds at each - about 1,000 on three separate occasions. This experienced observer, a veteran Cambodia election-watcher, remarked on the success of this grass-roots effort.

... But Issues Campaign Stalled

¶13. (SBU) The focused issues campaign that Sam Rainsy had initiated last year so that every candidate could repeat it ad nauseum has now died a quiet death and lays like another ruin at Preah Vihear. It was a simple and effective platform: promising more jobs; lower prices for gas, fertilizer and electricity; and free health care. During Phnom Penh's shock inflationary period earlier this year, the message was resonating widely. Now that every Cambodian of voting age is preoccupied with the defense of the motherland against Thai invaders at Preah Vihear, it is almost as if these issues had never existed. SRP efforts to insert key parliamentarians into the foreign and defense policy debate (key SRP parliamentarians such as Son Chhay rushed to Preah Vihear) have not gained much traction. The party in power has a clear incumbent advantage in this time of perceived national emergency. In the meantime, HRP serves as SRP's mirror image and attracts some of the same voter base, despite Khem Sokha's protestations that he is seeking former

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FUNCINPEC supporters.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) SRP is expecting to do better than in 2003 and has certainly enjoyed a more open political space with far less violence, threats or intimidation than in past election campaigns. While it has shown more maturity at the grass roots than in such headline-grabbing antics as Sam Rainsy embroiling himself in a Khmer Rouge Tribunal controversy, and while SRP in this election is likely to gain seats at the

polls, whether SRP can realize the substantial gains it had set its sights on last year is questionable.

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